

SECTION 7 GUIDELINES - Snake River Basin Office
Rocky Mountain Gray Wolf (endangered)
Note: portions are classified, experimental, non-essential
(*Canis lupus*)

I. BACKGROUND

Legal Status

The Northern Rocky Mountain wolf (*Canis lupus irremotus*), as a subspecies, was listed as endangered in 1973 (38 FR 14678). However, based on the probability of enforcement problems and because the trend among taxonomists was to recognize fewer subspecies of wolves, the entire species was listed as endangered throughout the lower 48 States, except Minnesota, in 1978 (43 FR 9612).

Wolves were transplanted to the Central Idaho Reintroduction Area which includes the southern portion of the State of Montana, south of Interstate 90 and Central Idaho, during January 1995 (Figure 1). The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service transplanted approximately 15 additional wolves from Canada to Central Idaho during January 1996 in accordance with guidelines and goals in the Recovery Plan and the Final Gray Wolf Reintroduction EIS.

Species Description

Adult males average 40-45 kilograms (kg) (90 - 100 pounds [lbs] (range 20-80 kg [43 - 175 lbs]), whereas adult females average 34-39 kg (75 - 85 lbs) (range 17.7 - 56.75 kg [39 - 125 lbs]). Males are usually 1.5-2 meters (m) (5 - 6.5 feet [ft]) from nose to tail tip, while females range from 1.4 to 1.8 m (4.5 to 6 ft) in length. Most wolves stand 70-80 centimeters (cm) (26 - 32 inches [in]) tall at the shoulder. With long legs and deep, narrow chest, the wolf is well suited for fast and far-ranging travels. Wolf pelage in the Northern Rocky Mountains can vary from light gray or cream color to black.

Life History

Gray wolves are wide-ranging predators. Most packs include a pair of breeding adults, pups, and often yearlings and extra adults. Wild wolves typically do not breed until 22 months of age. Breeding occurs from late January through April, pups are born in late March to May after a 63-day gestation period. Litter sizes range from four to seven.

In general, wolves depend upon ungulates for food in the winter and supplement this diet during spring-fall with beaver and smaller mammals. In central Idaho, elk, mule deer, white-tailed deer, and moose where available, are the primary prey species. Columbian ground squirrels, snowshoe hare, and grouse are also available to wolves in central Idaho as an alternate prey source. Average food needs of an adult wolf is about 3.5 to 4.5 kg (8 - 12 lbs) of meat per day.

Population Dynamics and Range

Throughout much of their occupied range in the Northern Hemisphere, wolves typically occur in relatively low densities of 1 wolf per 65-130 square kilometers (km²) (40 - 80 square miles [mi²]). Wolves typically disperse at ages ranging from 9 to 28 months. Dispersal in the fall by yearlings (17 to 20 months old) is common. Daily travel distances for wolf packs range from 1.6 to 15 km (1 to 9 mi), while distances between successive kills vary from 13 to 55 km (8 to 34 mi). In most wolf populations, reproductive packs occupy exclusive territories, and nonbreeding loners either live in the buffer zones between territories or avoid the packs. Territories for packs of five or more wolves fall in the range of 80 to 325 km² (50 to 200 mi²).

Historical information on the distribution of wolves in Idaho indicates that nearly all of Idaho is within the former range of the Northern Rocky Mountain wolf. During the early 1900's, the Idaho Department of Fish and Game was authorized by State legislation to “devise and put into operation such methods and means, as would best serve to attain extermination of wolves, coyotes, wildcats and cougars”. Between 1919 and 1928, 258 wolves were poisoned, trapped, or shot. Intensive state and federal predator control programs were maintained throughout the 1950's; yet, few wolves were reported in the predator kill statistic. Nonetheless, in the years just prior to the 1995 wolf transplant, sightings of single and small groups of wolves were common in and around the Frank Church River of No Return Wilderness Area in central Idaho. The present suitable habitat for gray wolves in Idaho is shown in the attached map (Figure 1 - Gray wolf) and includes the area generally north of the Snake River and portions of the eastern part of the State which border on Wyoming and Montana.

Habitat Needs

Historically, wolves utilized a broad spectrum of habitats including grasslands, sagebrush steppes, coniferous and mixed forest and alpine areas. Habitats used by wolves typically have an abundance of natural prey and, more recently, minimal conflict with human interests and uses.

Wolf Denning Sites: Wolves may dig out and/or visit whelping dens weeks before the birth of pups. In the Northern Rockies, wolf pups are born any time from late March to late April or possibly early May. Some particular dens or denning areas may receive traditional use by a wolf pack over time. Wolves are particularly sensitive to human activity near den sites and may abandon them if disturbed.

Ungulate Calving/Fawning Areas: Wolves prey selectively upon the newborn and young of moose, bison, elk, and deer in calving/fawning areas during May and June. Although the actual locations of such areas may vary from year to year, depending on weather and snow conditions, many receive traditional use by ungulates.

Ungulate Summer/Fall Range: On a biomass basis, ungulates comprise the bulk (more than 90 percent) of wolves' diets during summer and fall in the Rocky Mountains. Mule and white-tailed deer, elk, and moose are the principal prey species.

Ungulate Winter Range: During winter, wolves in the Rocky Mountains prey almost exclusively upon deer, elk, and moose. Winter range is often the limiting factor for ungulate populations. Thus, maintaining productivity of winter ranges and ungulate numbers is important.

Wolf Rendezvous Sites: Wolf rendezvous sites are specific resting and gathering areas occupied by wolf packs during summer and early fall after the whelping den has been abandoned. They are characterized by matted vegetation in a meadow, a system of well-used trails through the adjacent forest and across the meadow, and resting beds adjacent to trees. A wolf pack will usually move from the whelping den (or occasionally a second den) to the first rendezvous site when the pups are 6 to 10 weeks of age (late May-early July). The first rendezvous site is often within 1.5 to 10 km (1 to 6 mi) of the whelping den. A succession of rendezvous sites are used by the pack until the pups are mature enough to travel with the adults (September - early October). Rendezvous sites-- especially the first one--may receive traditional use by wolf packs. It is also the initial rendezvous site at which wolves appear most sensitive to prolonged or substantial human disturbances.

Riparian Habitat: Wolves commonly prey on beaver during ice-free times (spring and fall). Beaver may serve as an important alternate prey source during summer, in part buffering or reducing wolf predation on young ungulates. In some wolf-prey systems, survival of wolf pups may be linked to beaver abundance. Cover and Space: The term "cover" is defined as areas secure from human disturbance and with vegetation that hides an animal. Den and rendezvous sites are often characterized by having forested cover nearby and by being distant from human activity. The wolf's need for cover is also related indirectly to the cover requirements of its principal prey in a particular area. As social carnivores at the top of the ecological pyramid, wolves need comparatively large spaces in which to find sufficient vulnerable ungulates and alternative prey for food.

Summary of Threats

The population decline of the gray wolf was a result of: (1) intensive human settlement, (2) direct conflict with domestic livestock, (3) humans lack of understanding of the animal's ecology and habits, (4) fears and superstitions concerning wolves, and (5) the extreme control programs designed to eradicate it. Generally, land development, loss of habitat, poisoning, trapping, and hunting are recognized as important reasons for decline of the Northern Rocky Mountain wolf. Although maintenance and improvement of suitable habitat may be the key long-term factor in wolf conservation, an important factor limiting wolf recovery in the Northern Rocky Mountains is human-induced mortality. Researchers in Alaska, Michigan, and Canada all document that, far from being a physical threat to humans, healthy, wild wolves actually avoid humans. No case of modern North Americans being seriously injured by wolves can be documented.

References

The following references contain all of the information and scientific literature citations used in the preparation of these guidelines. Individuals interested in additional background information are referred to them for a complete gray wolf bibliography.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. 1987. Northern Rocky Mountain Wolf Recovery Plan. USFWS, Denver. 119pp.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. 1994. Final Environmental Impact Statement, The Reintroduction of Gray Wolves to Yellowstone National Park and Central Idaho. USFWS, Denver.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. 1994. Federal Register Vol. 59, No. 24. Establishment of an Experimental Population of Gray Wolves in Central Idaho and Southwestern Montana. Pages 60266-60281.

U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service. 1978 (March 9, 1978). Federal Register Vol. 43, Rule to list the Gray wolf in the lower 48 States as endangered. Page 9612.

Key Contacts in Idaho

Nez Perce Tribe Wolf Program, P. O. Box 365, Lapwai, Idaho 83540. (208) 634-1061.

U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Snake River Basin Office, 1387 South Vinnell Way, Room 368, Boise, Idaho 83709 (208) 378-5243

II. GUIDELINES - Protocol for Evaluating Project Effects

Since the translocation of wolves from Canada, the population in Idaho south of Interstate Highway 90 is considered “experimental, non-essential” under Section 10(j) of the Endangered Species Act. Under these circumstances, Federal action agencies are required to confer with the Service if their actions are likely to jeopardize the continued existence of gray wolves. The Service does not anticipate any actions that would result in a “likely to jeopardize the continued existence” determination for the reintroduced, experimental population of wolves. Of course, agencies may opt to confer with the Service regardless of their determination and are encouraged to do so at any time on any questions or issues they have pursuant to Section 7 of the Act. The management of wolves outside the experimental area, including northwestern Montana and northern Idaho, are not covered by these rules. These wolves are managed as fully protected under the Endangered Species Act (Figure 1 - Gray wolf).

There may be many situations where projects may adversely affect wolves and would therefore require section 7 consultation or conferencing. The most important issue to consider for gray

wolves is the potential for effects to their prey (mostly ungulates).

Some examples of situations that may affect the gray wolf include:

- C activities and projects that result in a net loss or degradation of habitat where ungulate use is abundant, such as fawning/calving grounds and winter range;
- C activities or projects that occur within 1.6 km (1 mi) of an active wolf den or rendezvous site;
- C the use of non-selective methods (snares, poison) to control predators.

Issues to address in a biological assessment for gray wolves:

- C analyze adjacent key habitat areas, including known den sites or rendezvous sites;
- C if the project vicinity receives high seasonal levels of ungulate use, consider scheduling the project when the gray wolf's prey is least likely to be in the area;
- C open roads can affect gray wolves by reducing the use of the area by ungulates through habitat loss or displacement. In addition, roads may increase the potential for poaching of the wolf or its prey. Trails open to motorized vehicles should be considered roads for planning purposes.

Items concerning wolf identification and education to include in contracts for projects in gray wolf habitat:

- C require contractors to report wolf sightings to the agency immediately after viewing a wolf;
- C insure that proper sanitation is used in all contractor's camps and work sites;
- C inform the contractor of penalties for harming or harassing a wolf.

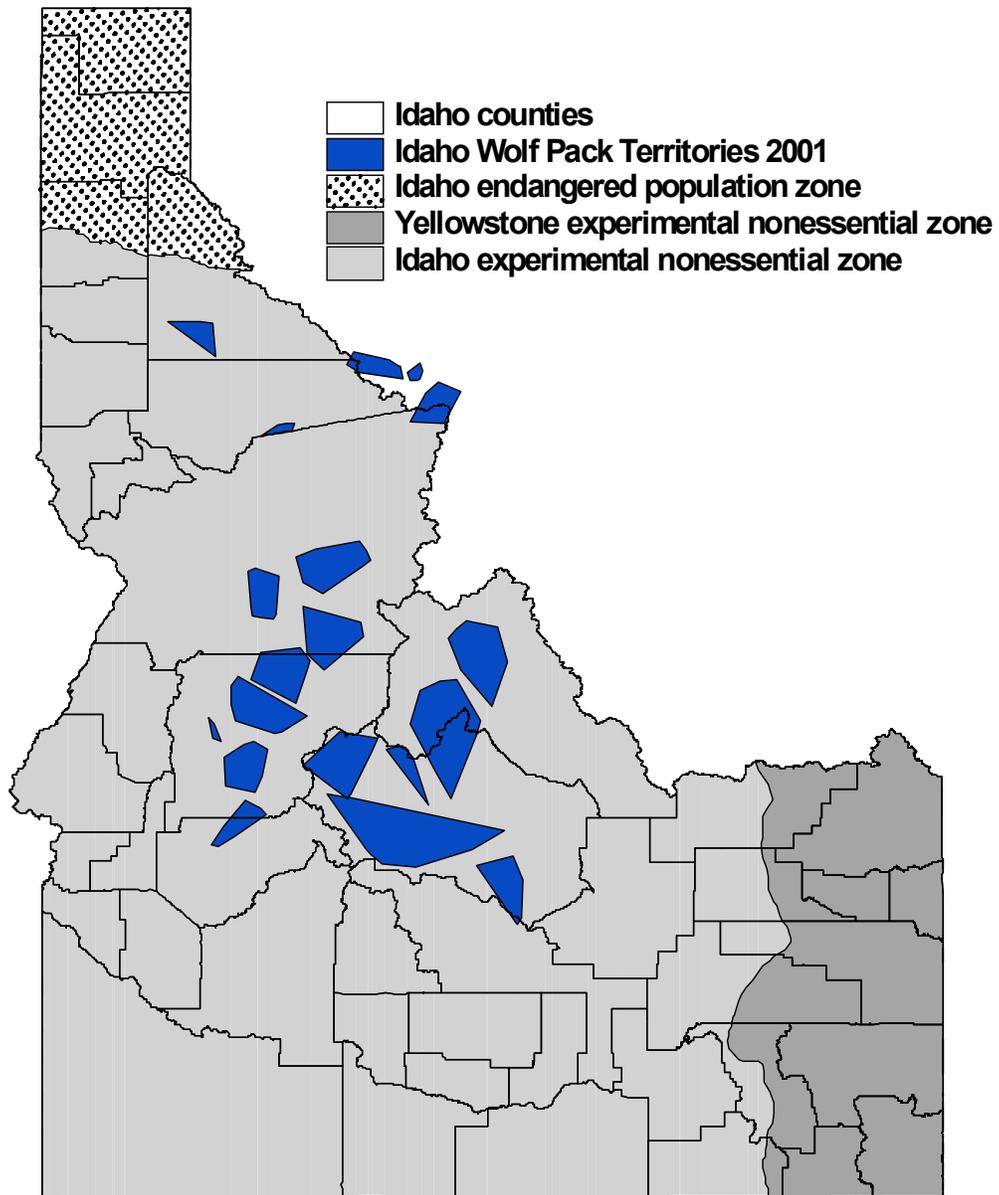


Figure 1 - Gray wolf. Potential gray wolf habitat in Idaho. Wolf pack territories derived from home range analysis. Courtesy of the Nez Perce Tribe.